

A multilingual virtual tour for international students

The Web-based library at Baruch College opens doors

by Arthur Downing and Leo Robert Klein

Providing effective library orientation for international students poses special challenges. An international student's proficiency in the language of the host country may be limited, and his or her functional vocabulary is unlikely to include library terminology. International students encounter library procedures, resources, and systems that are quite different from what they had experienced in their homeland. Moreover, the educational system of their native country may entail a role for the library that contrasts with the course requirements for library research faced in the host country.¹

Academic libraries have employed a variety of methods to introduce international students to the library and help them acquire a general knowledge of library resources and services in advance of more intensive instruction.

Some libraries have experimented with face-to-face tours or orientation programs in the native languages of their international stu-

dents, however, this approach is labor-intensive, difficult to administer to a large student population, and dependent upon the scheduling availability of students.² Despite the initiation of innovative programs tailored to the needs of international students, it is still most common for libraries to simply include inter-

national students in a brief tour of the library as part of the general student orientation to the campus. Based on reports with students at colleges across the United States, it seems that international students do not understand or recall very much of the information presented about the library during these encounters.³ Library

orientation programs tend to be delivered at a time when international students are distracted, anxious, and somewhat overwhelmed. They are adjusting to a new living environment and a foreign culture, as well as struggling to absorb a great deal of information about the college that is being presented to them in a language they are still learning.



The multilingual Web-based library's homepage.

About the authors

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The William and Anita Newman Library of Baruch College, City University of New York, was faced with the need to deliver a meaningful orientation for a large population of international students; Baruch College has the highest enrollment of international students among institutions offering a master's program in the United States.⁴ The library sought to offer a self-paced tour that would be provided in an international student's native language and be available whenever needed, including prior to arrival on campus.

These requirements led the library to develop the multilingual Web-based library found at http://newman.baruch.cuny.edu/about/v_tour. This virtual tour is offered in the nine most commonly reported native languages of Baruch College students: English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Russian, Polish, Greek, and Turkish. The tour consists of three sections: Welcome—a text and audio welcome message; Tour—a 28-frame “slide show” that presents the key features of the library usually discussed in a walking tour; and Maps—Interactive floor plans that are linked to each item included in the tour.

Development process

After the library administration, the Web coordinator, and the Information Services Division (i.e., reference/instruction librarians) agreed on the initial concept of the tour, the Information Services Division prepared a 2,000-word English-language script based on the talking points the librarians cover in their usual walking tour.

The Web coordinator used a digital camera to obtain images for each slide in the tour. The library identified the student translators by contacting student cultural organizations and posting signs on campus. Native speakers of the target language were hired on a contract basis. Each initial translation involved at least two translators who compared their work to reach consensus.

Next, the work was reviewed by at least one translator/editor. Translators were asked to avoid literal translations of the English text. The goal was to get as close as possible to a text that seemed to have originated in the target language. When in doubt about the most appropriate translation for a segment of text, translators were asked to select the expression they would use if they were speaking to a friend. When translators were uncertain about library terminology or technical terms, they solicited opinions from friends at home via e-mail or tested their choices in native-language Internet chatrooms.

Two versions of the tour were created—an animated version in Macromedia Flash and a more traditional version in HTML. The Flash version is designed to make the library's message more memorable for the students. The HTML version is provided for users with slower Internet connections, special accessibility needs, or browsers that lack the necessary plug-in. File sizes were kept to a minimum, although Flash occasionally ran into linguistic difficulties with particularly rich character sets—traditional Chinese being one—and this would be reflected in the ultimate file size.

Non-Roman character sets, in fact, posed a considerable challenge, at least initially, with most applications and the operating system itself (NT4) refusing to cooperate. A work-around was finally found using Mac OS/9 language kits. Even then, two texts that came from nonstandard word processing applications had to be re-entered manually. The Web design, animation, audio file creation, and image processing were accomplished using standard Web development tools (e.g., Photoshop, Illustrator, Flash, Dreamweaver, Premier, and Peak LP).

As a dramatic, albeit optional, touch, an audio narration plays in sync with the scrolling text in the welcome section in each of the languages. It soon became apparent, however, that the individual responsible for the translation was not always the best can-



Web page for the Chinese version of the Newman Library Virtual Tour at http://newman.baruch.cuny.edu/about/v_tour/chinese_trad/v_tour_html.htm.

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didate for the voice work. In these cases, either those involved with the translation enlisted friends or library staff were recruited. A broadcast-quality voice was not as important as enthusiasm and patience. The completed tour was evaluated by students and library staff. In addition to reviewing occasional student comments about the tour, formal student evaluations are obtained in library instruction classes.

How the tour is used

The virtual tour is used by the library and other college departments for both recruitment and orientation. The college's International Student Services Center informs all prospective international students of the tour and has publicized it in their newsletter. The English as a Second Language Program of the college's Division of Continuing and Professional Studies also provides students with the URL for the tour.

Student cultural organizations have notified their members and friends at home about the tour. There are students who take the virtual tour prior to arriving on campus and others who use it to clarify or remember what was described during the walking tour that the library continues to provide during new student orientation.

Some students use the tour to increase their English-language proficiency by opening separate browsers for the English version and the version of the tour in their native language in order to compare the text. All versions of the tour were visited more than 2,500 times in the four months since the public release in the fall 2000 semester.

The virtual tour has helped the library demonstrate its commitment to the success of its diverse student population. It represents a substantial investment of staff time, funds, and technical resources over the 18-month devel-

opment period, as well as an ongoing allocation of resources to update the content to reflect inevitable changes in the library.

The collaborative work behind the creation of the tour brought the library closer to student cultural organizations. Although student translators were paid a nominal sum for their work, they contributed many additional hours because of the strong sense of pride they felt in being included in the project.

As noted on the Web page for the virtual tour, the library welcomes assistance from members of the Baruch College community to translate the tour into additional languages. To ensure the quality of the translation and the accuracy of the content, the library requires a reliable pool of native speakers of the target language to be available on a periodic basis to update the translation.

The virtual tour is meant to enhance, rather than replace, face-to-face interactions between the library staff and international students, which is why walking tours and other orientation programs are still provided. The tour is designed to apply the multimedia capabilities of the Web to establish an early rapport with international students and supply them with critical information in a format that is understandable and convenient. The aim is to help a large, growing population derive maximum benefit from the daunting yet valuable experience of studying abroad.

Notes

1. Ziming Liu, "Difficulties and Characteristics of Students from Developing Countries in Using American Libraries," *College and Research Libraries* 54, no. 1 (January 1993): 25–31.

2. Manuel D. Lopez, "Chinese Spoken Here: Foreign Language Library Orientation Tours," *C&RL News* 44, no. 8 (September 1983): 267–69.

Daniel Liestman and Connie Wu, "Library Orientation for International Students in Their Native Language," *Research Strategies* 8, no. 4 (1999): 191–96.

3. Yoshi Hendricks, "The Japanese as Library Patrons," *C&RL News* 52, no. 4 (April 1991): 221–25.

4. Institute for International Education, *Open Doors, 1999/2000* (NY: Institute for International Education, 2000), http://www.opendoorsweb.org/Lead%20Stories/Colleges_and_Universities.htm#Master's. ■

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